

# THE ABOLITION OF PAUPERISM.

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## A SERMON.

PREACHED AT THE SOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,  
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BY

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"The poor have glad tidings proclaimed to them."—MATT. xi, 5.

AT the annual meeting of the "Associated Charities" in November last, the Vicar-General of the Roman Catholic Church made a careful plea for the preservation of poverty, as an essential element in society. Indeed, he seemed to take it for granted, and I think did take it for granted, that his audience at heart agreed that poverty was a necessity, and that, in all our devisings, we must leave it as one of the foundation-stones of our whole social edifice. The argument limped. So far as there was any argument, it amounted to this: Many of the orders of the Roman Church are sworn to poverty in their vows. So far, then, you must have poverty, or you cannot have these orders of beggars. But I do not think he meant to rest on this argument. I think he meant to appeal to an undefined feeling in his hearers' minds that, of course, there must be poverty in the world, as there must be midnight or pestilence or tempest. He certainly said that there were such great advantages connected with the institution that we must take care never to be rid of it.

Now, in fact, this sort of talk belongs to just the class of protest with which, in 1721, the older physicians in Boston pleaded for the preservation of the small-pox, in face of the eager clergy of the town, who wanted to introduce inoculation. These doctors then said that small-pox was ordained of God, and that men must not fly in his face. They said there always had been small-pox, and therefore there always must be. They had some success in enlisting on their side the most ignorant people in the town and those who would profit most by the proposed improvement. All the same, they were in the wrong, as the conservative eulogists of poverty are in the wrong; and they had to give way to God's purposes in making an old world new.

I am quite sure, however, that Dr. Byrne, in his speech,

appealed to a latent feeling which is widely spread, though probably ill-defined everywhere. You see it trickling out in commonplace stories for children on the last pages of religious newspapers, in which the impression is given that the poor children are little saints, and the rich children or grown people are badly tainted with sin. Of course, if it is true that poverty is the best school of righteousness, we ought to encourage poverty. Then there are the words of Moses, "You will always have the poor with you," — words which Jesus cited once, which people remember as dully as they remember most Scripture texts, which they write as a phylactery or talisman, and then idolatrously worship.

Nothing is more certain than what Jesus Christ did mean when he said this. Of that, I will speak before I have done. He did not mean at that time, or at any time, to fix the seal of poverty on the social system of the New World which he was founding. On the other hand, he meant that it should be a New World. As he abolished slavery, as he abolished tyranny, and meant to abolish disease of the body, he meant to abolish that poverty which makes slaves of those who suffer under it. Wherever his principles have had their way, his intention has been carried out. There are towns in all parts of the Christian world where such pauperism as curses unchristian society is wholly unknown. And, as the social order improves, such pauperism becomes less and less, till it ceases to be.

The abolition of pauperism now is, therefore, an object just as definite as was once the abolition of the small-pox or of slavery. If we will relieve ourselves from the false sentiment of the goodyish stories of which I have spoken, and the false logic of that Catholic Church which has always wanted to keep nine-tenths of the world under the spiritual dominion of the other tenth, we shall devote ourselves with courage and hope to this abolition enterprise. And as the Board of Health three years ago abolished small-pox for the time in this community, as the steady growth of a conviction in two generations of men abolished slavery, in a long endeavor of near fifty years, so is it in the power of any Christian community, which carries out in fact the central and eternal Christian principles, to abolish pauperism. That is to say, it can abolish it with those of whom it has the permanent care. You would not say that the Health Commissioners had failed, because, after the city was free from small-pox, a

ship-load of people sick of it arrived at the pier. That is no fault of theirs. You do not say that Mr. Garrison and his friends have failed, because slavery still exists in Brazil. That is out of their range. It is in the power of a Christian community to extinguish pauperism within its own sphere. Let unchristian communities, or let the Pope of Rome, speak for themselves, or speak for Rome. I say to extinguish pauperism. The distinction is to be carefully drawn between pauperism and poverty, as we shall see. But I do not mean to press this distinction to a fine point. I mean that it is in the power of a Christian Church and a Christian State, working in harmony and with energy, to give to every man, woman, and child, who is not disabled by disease, a life of reasonable comfort and happiness, not meanly dependent on the alms of others. So far we abolish pauperism, and, in the ordinary sense of words, we abolish poverty.

It is not so much my business to-day to show in detail how this is to be done. If that were necessary in this place, it would only be because I had wholly failed in the preaching of five-and-twenty years here; and it would now be quite too late for me to repair such damages. I will state very briefly the requisitions made on State and Church in this matter, if we mean to have the kingdom of God come; and then I will pass on to look at the fallacy of which I have spoken.

I. A Christian State does for all what it does for one. And in no case is it satisfied with that supervision which may be merely accidental, which a father or other guardian gives to the children under his care. Thus, in matters of education, every child shall learn to read and write, and shall have a reasonable knowledge of arithmetic. This shall be done, whether the father knows these things or not, whether he cares for them or not. So boys and girls shall be taught to swim, and trained in other physical exercises which look to health of body and health of mind,—shall be, whether the parents are or are not careless about these things. And their education in both these directions, mental and physical, shall be carried so far that each child, on coming to manhood, shall be able to make a fit beginning in one or other of the industries of that community. A sea-faring community shall fit its boys to be seamen; a manufacturing community, to be machinists and manufacturers. And in every community those who are born to be Mozarts or to be Raphaels shall



have their chances as well. And all this is vain, unless the training of every boy and girl rests from the beginning on the Three Eternities, on Faith and Hope and Love. The old phrase of Queen Elizabeth's time was not a bad one. In those times, they did not teach the children to spell. Even Shakespeare and Sidney spelled very much as they chose. They taught them no geography till they learned it from the mast-head; and, as for their arithmetic, it may be that Raleigh and Lord Bacon could not have worked out a modern sum in vulgar fractions. Still, their theory of education was rightly centred. They said every boy must learn, even while he was a boy, "to speak the truth, to serve the Queen, and to fight the Spaniard." In this concrete form, they stated the eternal necessities more distinctly, perhaps, than if they had veiled them in more abstract expressions. To be true enough to speak the truth is at the bottom of all practical education. In this matter which engages us to-day, all pauperism, if you carry back its genealogy far enough, descends from a liar somewhere; and it is one of the crowd of evils which vanish in proportion as men and women and children are all true.

II. A Christian State re-enforces its system of education by the whole drift of its legislation. For it is merely a trick of sixpenny sophists to speak of education as if it were only an affair of books or of the schools. In a Christian State, all the legislation is guided by the same certainty,—that, if one member suffer, all the members suffer,—and by the same determination,—that no single member shall suffer. The whole theory is that the whole ship may be lost, if there is one rotten tree-nail. That is the interpretation in politics of the Christian instruction, "Honor all men." So the State provides that industries shall be varied. If Robert Stephenson be born to be a great inventor, he shall not be predestined by any accursed Calvinism to spend his life in fishing for codfish or in harvesting grain. Again, a Christian State provides for the purity of its boys and girls. Even supposing that grown men and women have a right to risk or throw away their lives, a Christian State screens its boys and girls from the seductions of the liquor-shop. Till they are men and women, they shall not be led into temptation. Once more, a Christian State is absolutely just to the weakest classes in its taxation. Of course, States must use money; but there are those writers—and I think they are right—who say that it is wise for a State so to adjust its taxation

that, until a man have somewhat advanced from the nakedness to which he is born, till he have made some accumulation of visible property, he should not be compelled to make a contribution to the State. Of course, if he wish to vote, he must pay properly for that privilege. Of course, too, wherever the burden were fixed, he would indirectly bear his share. But the theory supposes that it is well for the State to bend over, beyond the line of strict justice, in its effort to encourage beginners; so to speak, to tempt every one to take a share in the commonwealth. That we have not failed in this business here appears in the Governor's statement on Thursday that, of the population of Massachusetts, men, women, and children, including even new-comers from foreign lands and little babies, who cannot tell their right hands from their left, nearly one-half now have deposits in the savings banks. All legislation which looks in this direction is genuine. It proceeds on the true hypothesis of a Christian State, that pauperism is only an accident, and never a permanent element in its affairs.

III. When you apply the immense latent forces of republican government to carry out these principles, you find that comfort is indeed the rule, and pauperism, or what people call poverty, is the exception. This is a great point gained over that sentimental theory of the Kingdom of Heaven, fostered by the Saint Dominics and Saint Francises and other apostles of beggary, in which poverty is the rule for the great mass of men, and comfort the exception for the rulers, whether in State or Church. Let no man say that I am talking of a mere ideal. I had occasion, eleven years ago, to study the social condition of Vineland, a town then seven years old, in New Jersey. The population of this town was ten thousand. Its pauper expenses in the year 1869 were four dollars, and its police expenses fifty, the salary of one constable. The town had been founded with certain peculiarities of organization, chief among which was the certainty that there should be no retail liquor traffic. A letter from Vineland informs me that now, after eleven years, all the expenses for the poor are seven hundred dollars a year. As for crime and its repression, the charge, for a year, is one hundred and four dollars.\* Nor do the expenses of crime,

\* When I delivered this sermon, I had misunderstood the letter I cited from Vineland, and accidentally confused the expenses for pauperism and for crime. They are correctly stated in the printed text above.

such as they are, seem to belong to the population proper. It is only on Saturday night, when certain railroad trains expose them to a sort of invasion, that they keep a constable on duty to care for criminals and beggars. His wages — of two dollars a week — make the charge for the care of criminals. That is the sort of standard we are to aim at. And, as you all know, this is by no means a single case. We all remember county jails, where the keepers take summer boarders because they have no other inmates, and town poor-houses which are vacant through the whole year. If there were any necessity, I would furnish a thousand cases in this country as satisfactory as this of Vineland.\* I certainly do not say that in a city like Boston, which has not been permitted to train its own people, you can expect such results in an hour or a year. We have a population, half of whom were trained under the sky of the most miserable country in Europe. They are under the dominion of a Church which has never squarely tried to prevent poverty, but has always apologized for it and retained it, as a part of its ecclesiastical policy. We are, so far, in just the same position that the Board of Health would be, in my illustration, if a thousand vessels, with small-pox on board, came up together to the wharves. But this unfortunate and temporary accident does not change our duty, nor does it affect the certainty of our ultimate victory. In the long run, it is Comfort which triumphs, and Poverty which comes to an end. It is Health which in the end triumphs, and Disease which gives way.

IV. The promise of the Sermon on the Mount is that, if we will seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, such clothing and food as we need shall be ours. It is the fashion, even among Christian critics, to explain the Sermon on the Mount away, as a compound of "Orientalisms," or "glittering generalities." That has been the interpretation of a Church which is a close corporation, which believes in poverty, and for its purposes wants to maintain the class of beggars. It is more fair to the Saviour of men to take his words as if he meant what he said. Compare them with what he said all along, and you will come out on the certainty that he gave this promise: If a man will care for the good of mankind,—which Jesus calls the kingdom of God,—

\* Thus, in Alfred, N.Y., as a letter from a well-informed correspondent tells me, there has been no pauper for twenty years. Greeley, Colorado, reports no expenses for police and nothing for the poor.



if he will live a righteous life, pure, temperate, honorable, and industrious, he shall not want either for clothing or for bread. Try that experiment fairly, and see if it does not come true. Let your man start, not handicapped by ignorance, by the burdens of low caste, by outrageous taxes, or by drunkenness. Start him on a free world, with a freeman's energy, and with the purity and courage of a son of God, and he does have garments sufficient and food sufficient added to his endeavor. In the one case in a thousand, where he is disabled by a bullet from his country's enemy, or by a shipwreck in some tempest which he did not brew, it is not in vain for him that the Christian commonwealth has been founded. Garments and bread surely come to him; and you feel that these are not alms, but are his due. As the disabled soldier is honored and not disgraced by the traces of the wound he carries, the man or the woman who, in the discharge of duty, has become incapacitated for farther effort, is honorably entitled to the help of the community he has fairly served. That exception is clearly an exception. Poverty is no longer the groundwork of your State. Poverty is the unintentional accident, and comfort is the rule.

Note carefully the central and real statement of Jesus Christ, far beneath all that superficial drivel in which men justify the poverty which is really only an inheritance from barbarism. "Together" is his great watchword. His "Kingdom of God" is a "*Commonwealth*." "Ye are all brethren," that is his encouragement and his direction. Born from the womb of the same mother, we all partake the nature of the same Father, God. So we are all bound to each other in a tie we cannot shake off. It is a fellowship as real, if as mysterious, as the attraction which binds the atoms of matter to each other. It is true, then, that each from each other needs something. No man can live alone. In a convict's cell or on a desert island, he slowly dies. You need the tenderness, the counsel, the sympathy of the brothers and sisters whom you meet in daily life. And they need yours. This life is all a broken wreck, indeed, unless you can rely on their intelligence and skill. You cannot make sails, unless he makes masts. Nay, both of you are useless, unless those yonder will freight your ships. I cannot read, unless some one will write the books. And they write in vain, unless others will print them and bind them. Every man is his brother's keeper, as Cain found out to his sorrow, and as the followers of Cain, in the selfish schools of to-day, will

find out to theirs. In this sense of mutual dependence, and in this only, is it true that the poor are always with us. It is mutual dependence. But it is not one-sided dependence, which makes abject dependence. It is the dependence of brother upon brother. It is not the dependence of vassal upon chief, of subject upon king, of penitent upon priest. All that abject dependence is done away in the new life of the kingdom of God.

And you and I, trusting ourselves to that goodness of God which feeds and clothes those who try to obey him in this common life, have the other duty of trampling out what are left of the sparks of the old fires. We are to put an end, where we can, to the contagion of the old disease. These are our marching orders. We are to open the eyes of those it blinded and the ears of those it deafened. We are to set its lame to walking and its mourners to rejoicing. In our intelligent philanthropy, we are to proclaim glad tidings to those whom the worldliness of the world and the corruptions of the Church would have left forever poor.

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